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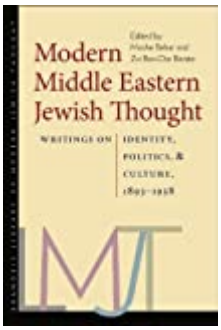

Moshe Behar, Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, eds. *Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought: Writings on Identity, Politics, and Culture, 1893-1958.* Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2013. xxxix + 257 pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58465-884-9; $26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58465-885-6.

Reviewed by Orit Bashkin (University of Chicago)

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Rethinking Arab Jewish Modernity: The Unknown Middle Eastern Canon

This anthology is a remarkable achievement and an outstanding selection of original texts written by important Jewish intellectuals in the modern period. The editors, Moshe Behar and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, look at Jewish writers from the Middle East as intellectuals, social critics, and political theorists, and not simply as chroniclers of the sociopolitical changes occurring in their societies. Sharing a wide range of approaches to politics and culture (liberalism, communism, nationalism), and selecting authors who defined themselves as Mizrahi, Sephardic, and Arab-Jewish, as well as Zionist, the editors have created a rich text that could be taught in classes about modernity and political thought, modern Jewish history, and Middle Eastern history. Many of the authors the editors discuss were prominent public figures in their time: they range from Sasson Dallal, the Jewish leader of the Iraqi Communist Party, to the Iraqi Jewish politician and philanthropist Ezra Menahem Daniel, and from the Egyptian patriot Murad Farg to the feminist writer Esther Moyal. The anthology includes texts in Arabic, Hebrew, French, and English, thus reflecting the multilingual world of Middle Eastern Jewry. These texts are framed by an insightful introduction in which Behar and Ben-Dor Benite clarify not only how the texts chosen are intended to free modern Jewish thought from Zionist and European teleological narratives, but also, and more significantly, how these texts help us think about modernity itself differently. They therefore speak of possibilities opened up by modernity, which encompassed Ottomanism, Arab nationalism, communism, patriotic localism, and Zionism, being fully aware of the significance of the texts they have translated and annotated for contemporary Israeli, Arab, American, and European readers. Therefore, the selection of both authors and texts endows the contemporary reader with a sense of the inventiveness of Middle Eastern Jewish thought, its significance for the Arab world, and the national acts of historical forgetfulness which have led to the exclusion of these writers from modern Arabic and Jewish thought.

The writers included in the work are extraordinary; they are gifted and unique observers of a variety of phenomena relating to modernity. Considering the effects

of the Arabic cultural revival movement (*al-nahda*) on Jewish thought, the authors include the works of one of Egyptâs leading intellectuals, and one deeply connected to the revival of its modern Arab culture, Yaâqub Sanuâ(1839-1912). A satirist, playwright, and journalist, Sanuâ was forced into exile in Paris because of his biting criticism of the Egyptian political elites, whom he felt enabled Egyptâs colonization. The fact that he was a Jew was known to most of the scholars who worked on his plays and journals, Egyptian and non-Egyptian alike. Yet it seems that his Jewishness played a limited role in his life; he was an Egyptian patriot, and supported the pan-Islamic ideology as a remedy for European colonialism and the corruption of the local Westernized elites. From what we know, he did not address many Jewish topics in most of his writings, even as such major events as the Dreyfus trial occurred in France. Readers might ask whether it is appropriate to impose a Jewish identity on a man who rarely self-identified as a Jew. Behar and Ben-Dor Benite try to meet these challenges in their inclusion of texts by Sanuâ that praise the Koran and that express his great love of, and identification with, Arab and Egyptian cultures and his anticolonial stance. But they also include a beautiful letter Sanuâ wrote to Philippe de Tarrazi (1865-1956), in which he clarifies that he never converted to Islam and expresses his happiness that the âMuslims now respect and love this humble servant, because they see an Israelite raising the banner of Islam, demonstrating his love for Islam in front of all the people, and trying to strengthen the ties of friendship between Muslims and Christiansâ (p. 28). At times, some of the texts by *nahdawi* Jewish figures, especially those of Esther Moyal, read exactly like texts written by Muslim and Christian intellectuals from this period. Moreover, works written by Jews in the anthology originally appeared in highly reputable Arabic platforms, like *al-Garida*, arguably the most important journal of Egyptian liberals.

One of the key contributions of the anthology is its multifaceted approach to Zionism; it mirrors, in other words, the *variety* of approaches Middle Eastern Jews took to the question of Palestine, rather than presenting these positions in some sort of evolutionary scheme. The editors highlight Jewish opposition to Zionism, by Jews like the Iraqi patriots Menahem Salih Daniel and Yusuf al-Kabir and by communists like Yusuf Harun Zilkha and Sasson Dallal (from Iraq), as well as Marcel Shirazi and Henri Curiel (from Egypt), suggesting that many Jewish intellectuals felt that Zionism greatly damaged their standing in their home countries by claiming to represent Jews in Arab lands as well. I cannot overstate the significance of the translations of these works into English. I hope that radical Jews today read the works of Zilkha, Curiel, and others, as they crystallize their own opinions about contemporary Zionism. That said, Behar and Ben-Dor Benite also attempt to understand what might be called âMizrahi Zionism.â While previous scholarship has tended to capitalize on a binary between Arab-Jew and Zionist (especially Ella Shohatâs earlier works) or saw the hybridized adoption of a Zionist ideology by Jews from Arab lands as typifying their activities in Israel (as in Yehouda Shenhavâs discussion), Behar and Ben-Dor Benite are less defensive. Their selection of texts makes a clear distinction between Palestine and the rest of the Arab Middle East. While residing in Arab countries, most of the authors chosen for this anthology objected to Zionism, based on nationalist, leftist, and patriotic arguments. In Palestine, however, the situation seems different as some Sephardim believed that Jewish migration to Ottoman and mandatory Palestine could help develop the country and likewise felt that Jews who had been persecuted in Europe and saw Palestine as their homeland had the right to settle there. However, the editorsâ selection of Sephardic writers suggests that their vision of Zionism was very different from the European one. Their texts critique European Jews for mistreating the Arabs, for misunderstanding Arab culture, and for the damage their activities did to Palestine. The Sephardic authors, whether Zionist or critical of the Zionist project, analyze the situation in Palestine with care and attention; they see the gaps between Arabs and Jews growing, and they comment on it both apprehensively and insightfully. Here is what Hayyim Ben Kiki, a Jew of North African descent born in Tiberias, who worked as a secretary of the Sephardic Union in Haifa and as a journalist, wrote about Zionist institutions in 1920: âEven our new [Zionist] institutions and press helped to fan the flames of misunderstandings between the Arabs and us. These institutions do not take into consideration anyone but the Jew and Europe, and totally ignore their neighbors. They treated Arabs prejudicially and dismissed themâimitating the prevailing Western attitude towards the Arabsâ (p. 97).

The last parts of the book deal with Middle Eastern Jews in Israel during the years 1948â59, the years of the mass migration of Middle Eastern Jews to Israel. These intellectuals watch, with great sadness, how the Arab, Levantine, and Eastern cultures of the Middle Eastern Jews are belittled and relegated to the sphere of the Arab enemy; how the framing of the Mizrahi comes into being; and how the Middle Eastern Jew comes to signify âblack-

nessâ in opposition to Ashkenazi âwhiteness.â It includes a text by Sami Michael, an Iraqi Jewish radical, who is still publishing in the Arabic press of the anti-Zionist Israeli Communist Party and thinking about the production of Arabic literature in Israel with fellow Arab communists. But most of the more recent writers are occupied with the marginalization of Mizrahim in Israel, the discrimination they faced, and, importantly, their desire to be full-fledged citizens of the new state. And in many such cases, the Palestinians completely disappear from the texts and the consciousness of their writers.

As I said, the anthology is an intellectual triumph, but I do have some minor critiques to offer. A book that celebrates the writings of Jews in Arab lands should have been much more careful in its translations of Arabic and the transliteration system is inconsistent and has many mistakes. For example, âal-Sahayuniyah âaduwat al-âarab wa al-yahudâ should have been translated as âZionism the enemy of the Arabs and the Jewsâ and not as âZionism against Arabs and Jewsâ (p. 143); âNawdat al-asdiqaâ al-adab al-âarabi al-taqqaddumiâ should have been âNadwat asdiqaâ al-adab al-âarabi al-taqaddumiâ (p. 199). I think more texts in Arabic should have been included; most of the texts by Yaqub Sanuâ are translated from the French, and one of the two translated from the Arabic has already appeared in another collection. In some cases it would have been better to indicate in a footnote that the titles chosen by Jewish authors for their essays were used in previously published essays: when Esther Moyal titles her essay *Nahdatuna*, she uses a title employed by dozens of *nahadwi* writers before her, while Joseph A. Cattaui Pachaâs title âon solidarityâ is in conversation with the concept of solidarity as articulated by the Egyptian liberal Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid. As for the translations, I think that providing the word used for certain concepts in the original language is vital; I would have liked to know, for example, what word was used in the Hebrew original for âWeltanschauungâ (p. 88).

More broadly, some voices are absent from the anthology–Ottoman and North African in particular. It might have been better to include fewer of the Palestinian Sephardic writers (whose texts constitute almost a quarter of the translated texts) and more writers from Casablanca to Istanbul, even if that meant engaging with Ladino and Judeo-Arabic. After all, views of Jews from Istanbul, Salonika, Fez, Oran, or San'a were part of the modern Middle East whose thinkers dealt with similar dilemmas and came up with different and creative solutions. Thus, the editors too narrowly define the modern Middle East and with this definition comes a certain limiting of the richness of its Jewish thought. Another point I would like to raise is that while the editors chose texts that show a different vision of Zionism as understood by Sephardim, I wish they had reflected more of the similarities between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Zionists. For example, I understand from the introduction that Rabbi Ben-Zion Meir Uziel was much more tolerant and less messianic, compared to his Ashkenazi religious Zionist peers, but his text reads very much like many of those written by European Zionists, especially in the sense that the Arabs are rarely mentioned in it.

In conclusion, this is a much-needed anthology; while the visions of many of its Jewish thinkers were shattered, especially during and after 1948, they still give us some hope. Thinking about Israel/Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, and many other places in the Middle East, it seems fitting to end with the words of Sasson Dallal, an Iraqi Jewish communist, writing to his brother before his execution, words which highlight the importance of *uncovering* and *remembering* the dreams of writers like Dallal: âDo not grieve for me, dear brother, instead carry my memory with you and perpetuate the fight, which will glorify the future of all humanityâ (p. 163).

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